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Dulk, Laura den; Ruijter, Judith de

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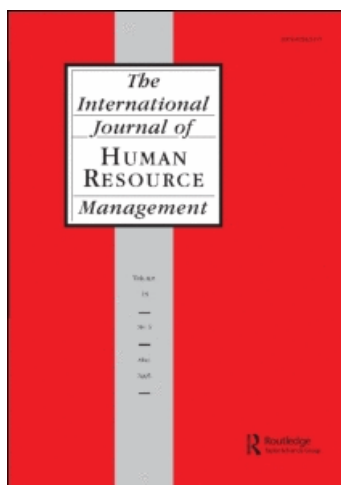
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### Managing work-life policies: disruption versus dependency arguments. Explaining managerial attitudes towards employee utilization of work-life policies

Laura den Dulk <sup>a</sup>; Judith de Ruijter <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

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## **Managing work-life policies: disruption versus dependency arguments. Explaining managerial attitudes towards employee utilization of work-life policies**

Laura den Dulk\* and Judith de Ruijter

*Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands*

What factors shape managerial attitudes towards the utilization of work-life policies? The influence of disruptiveness (Powell and Mainiero 1999) and dependency (Klein, Berman and Dickson 2000) arguments on managerial attitudes is examined using a vignette design. In this study, managers in four financial firms in the UK and the Netherlands were asked to judge hypothetical requests from employees to utilize work-life policies. Findings indicate that managers are mainly interested in the performance of their department or work unit, and work-life policies are often seen as disruptive. However, when the least disruptive request is considered (short-term leave), we find that dependency arguments also play an important role and managers are more likely to respond to their employees' personal and family needs.

**Keywords:** dependency; managerial attitudes; vignette study; work-life balance; work disruption; work-life policies

### **Introduction**

Employees today are offered a wide range of work-life arrangements; for example, they can work from home, reduce their working hours, work a compressed week and take various types of leave (e.g. Bond, Galinsky, Kim and Brownfield 2005; Riedmann, Bielenski, Szczurowska and Wagner 2006). Nevertheless, there is evidence that many employees are not taking advantage of existing policies, even though they face difficulties in balancing their work and family lives (e.g. Lewis and Lewis 1996; Hochschild 1997; Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness 1999; Van Luijn and Keuzenkamp 2004). Budd and Mumford (2005) show that, in the UK, a majority of employees does not believe that they personally can use the work/life policies present in the organization. Reasons for this low perceived availability are ignorance and high associated perceived costs, i.e. foregone earnings or fear of negative reprisals (Budd and Mumford 2005). In addition, the available work-life arrangements may not always meet the needs of employees.

Research suggests that managerial support is critical when it comes to utilizing work-life programmes and the effectiveness of these programmes (e.g. Perlow 1997; Fried 1999; Thompson et al. 1999; Allen 2001; Poelmans 2003), since it is up to managers to communicate, implement and manage work-life policies in organizations (Lewis 2003).

Despite the key role of managers in the practical implementation of work-life policies, few researchers have examined the factors that shape managerial attitudes. This may be related to the

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\*Corresponding author. Email: l.dendulk@uu.nl

fact that it concerns a complex phenomenon in which many interrelated factors at different levels – employee, manager, organizational and national context – play a role. We attempt to shed light on the role that various factors play in managerial attitudes towards work-life arrangements. How do managers view the growing number of work-life policies in their organization, and how do they respond to requests by employees who want to utilize policies such as parental leave or part-time work? And, more importantly, how can we explain managerial attitudes towards these requests? Research indicates that managers vary greatly in their responses to these requests. Managers may be very supportive and seek additional (informal) solutions, such as allowing employees to work from home when a child is ill. On the other hand, they may stick strictly to the official policies or even discourage employees from making use of them (e.g. Veenis 2000; Guerreiro, Abrantes and Pereira 2004; Lewis and den Dulk 2006). The term “management lottery” illustrates the variable and discretionary powers of managers, especially in facilitating – or not facilitating – employees’ work-life balance (Guerreiro et al. 2004).

Only a few US studies have tried to understand the differences in attitudes and practices of managers. A study by Casper, Fox, Sitzmann and Landy (2004) shows that managers have more positive attitudes towards work-life policies if they believe that such policies will contribute to their department’s performance. Powell and Mainiero (1999) developed a disruptiveness hypothesis to explain managerial decision-making when it comes to alternative work arrangements for subordinates. According to their hypothesis, managers consider whether requests have the potential to disrupt the conduct of work in the department. Their study, which involved 53 current or past managers enrolled in an MBA programme, indicates that “requests that were expected to be more disruptive to the conduct of work received less favourable decisions” (1999, 41). One of the study’s important conclusions was that managers mainly respond on the basis of short-term considerations.

Klein et al. (2000) stress the importance of dependency considerations and assume that managers “cherish” the human capital in their department. Managers want to motivate and retain employees because they make a major contribution to the performance of the department or work unit. In their study of attorneys who request to work part-time, Klein et al. (2000) found that managers’ attitudes were more positive when the attorneys in question performed well, would be difficult to replace, had strong organizational connections and threatened to leave if their requests were denied. So far, there are no studies that have tested the influence of these two types of arguments simultaneously, and it is commonly held that they are contradictory. We argue, however, that these arguments are not contradictory but complementary. In understanding managerial attitudes it is important to consider the dilemma managers face when deciding whether or not to grant employees’ requests to utilize work-life policies: Should they give priority to short-term departmental and organizational goals, i.e. ensure that the necessary work gets done and prevent disruption to the conduct of work, or should they give priority to long-term goals, i.e. retain valuable employees by responding to their personal and family needs? This dilemma is particularly striking when the two sets of goals are perceived as conflicting. Managers cope with the dual agenda of caring for employee needs and pursuing organizational goals by utilizing different strategies, for instance by being supportive during crises but very demanding in day-to-day working life (Guerreiro et al. 2004).

Until now, the scarce research that has been performed has neglected this dilemma when attempting to explain managerial attitudes and decision-making on work-life policies. Studies have focused either on dependency or disruptiveness arguments. This study addresses this gap by applying an integrated approach that combines insights from both perspectives to explain managerial attitudes.

Data were collected in two types of financial-sector organizations (banking/insurance companies and consultancy firms) in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, using a vignette

design. This study is the first attempt to test hypotheses derived from both theoretical perspectives in a single design, in a European context. In doing so, we gain a better understanding of the factors that shape managerial attitudes towards work-life policies and are able to test the validity of the arguments outside the US. The central research question that is addressed here is: How can we explain variations in managerial attitudes towards requests of employees to utilize work-life arrangements in financial sector organizations in the UK and the Netherlands?

The next section of this article presents our theoretical approach. This is followed by a description of the research design. Subsequent sections present the findings and discussion.

### **The dilemma managers face when implementing work-life policies**

Many interrelated factors at different levels – employee, manager, organizational and national context – are likely to shape managerial attitudes towards work-life policies. In order to understand managerial attitudes we use the rational choice perspective as a starting point. The primary assumption behind the rational choice model is that individuals behave rationally and weigh the costs and benefits of various alternatives given the information they have. Of course the assumption of strictly rational individuals is problematic. However, we use this framework as “a *method* of analysis rather than a claim that individuals are motivated by selfishness or material gain” (De Ruijter 2005: 3). This method offers the opportunity to systematically analyze the relative influence of various factors. In addition, since work-life policies are relatively new and not yet institutionalized, interest based arguments of managers are expected to be relatively important and shaped by the social context in which they operate (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; den Dulk 2001).

Managers are responsible for the performance of their department, and they are rewarded primarily for the results they achieve in their work units. It is therefore in the manager’s interest for his or her department to perform well. Work-life policies make managers’ jobs more complex and difficult because they force them to work with various schedules and arrange for replacements when employees are on leave; at the same time, they have to ensure that the necessary work is completed (Powell and Mainiero 1999).

When deciding whether or not to grant employee requests to utilize work-life policies, the manager weighs up the costs and benefits. Possible costs are the perceived disruption of work in the work unit (Powell and Mainiero 1999). Given the additional demands work-life policies place on managers, they may be unwilling to grant requests unless they believe that doing so will cause little or no disruption to the work.

However, *not* granting employee requests will also result in costs: a work-life imbalance for the employees involved, leading to stress, work-family conflict, decreased productivity, etc. (e.g. Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton 2000; Thomas and Ganster 1995). In the worst case, employees might decide to exit the organization, resulting in a loss of human capital. The magnitude of these costs hinges on the perceived dependency relationship between manager and employee. Managers depend on their subordinates (Klein et al. 2000). Their subordinates contribute – to varying degrees – to the department’s performance. This makes managers dependent on their employees, and the more the employee contributes the greater the manager’s dependency. This implies that, in the employee-manager relationship, the manager depends more heavily on employees who make a relatively large contribution to the department’s performance, and they may therefore be more willing to grant the requests of employees who are crucial to the department and the organization.

In summary: when deciding whether to grant employee requests concerning work-life policies, managers face a dilemma. Granting such a request involves costs, as it may disrupt the conduct of work to varying degrees. On the other hand, not granting a request also involves

costs, since it could lower the productivity of employees who are struggling to balance their work and family lives, and eventually lead to a loss of valuable human capital. Both disruptiveness and dependency arguments may influence managerial attitudes towards employee requests. Both the organizational and national context may also shape this dilemma, for example by offering incentives in the organization for implementing work-life policies or the presence of statutory provisions. In case of the latter, legislation increases the likelihood of a positive managerial attitude and decreases the discretionary space of managers regarding employee requests for utilization. However, in the two countries under study, statutory provisions often allow discretionary space. In case utilization conflicts with serious business interests, organization may turn down requests (den Dulk and van Doorne-Huiskes 2007).

### *Disruptiveness considerations*

According to Powell and Mainiero (1999), several factors influence the degree to which a manager will perceive a subordinates' request to utilize work-life policies as disrupting, namely: a) the type of work-life policy involved; b) the nature of the tasks, skills and responsibilities of the subordinate who is making the request; and c) the reason offered by the subordinate for making the request. In our study we were not able to examine the influence of the reason for a request on managerial attitudes.

The type of work-life policy matters because such policies differ in the extent to which they are likely to be disruptive. Managers are expected to have a more negative attitude to "disruptive" requests than to less disruptive ones, like short-term care leave. Even though it is not always clear what type of request is more or less disruptive, we can make some general assumptions. Extended leave often involves replacement problems, whereas this is generally much less the case when employees go on short-term leave or work from home occasionally for a day. Part-time work tends to imply that the workload must be adjusted to a shorter work week, and that additional staff may be required. In practice this is often not the case and employees have to do the same work in fewer hours. Part-time work may raise coordination costs for the managers because workers are structurally absent on certain week days. Job sharing might be a solution, but this is not a common practice in the organizations in this study. Occasionally working a day from home is likely to be perceived as less disruptive since it is applied flexibly and it implies a limited number of days per year. More substantial teleworking requests involving more structural working from home can be viewed as more disruptive.

*Hypothesis 1a:* Managers are more positive towards requests to utilize types of work-life policies that are less disruptive to the conduct of work (e.g. short-term care leave) than towards requests to utilize types of work-life policies that are more disruptive to the conduct of work (e.g. parental leave).

Another important factor in addition to the type of request is the problem of replacement. An assumption is that employees who have specialist skills are generally more difficult to replace than those who do not and their utilizing work-life policies will therefore be more disruptive (Powell and Mainiero 1999). When the employee is in a supervisory position, moreover, his or her request may be considered more disruptive because managers generally rely on such employees to achieve results, since they are responsible for the work of others as well as their own.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Managers are more positive towards requests by employees who have no specialist, hard-to-replace knowledge and skill than towards requests by employees who have a great deal of specialist knowledge and skill.



*Hypothesis 1c:* Managers are more positive towards requests by employees who do not supervise others than towards requests by employees in supervisory positions.

Powell and Mainiero (1999) do not consider the characteristics of the relevant department, but this may also be of importance for disruption reasons. Hence, we would like to explore this issue. It may be easier to replace employees who utilize work-life policies in some departments than in others. The larger the department is, for example, the easier it is to divide the work among employees.

*Hypothesis 1d:* Managers of relatively large departments are more positive towards employee requests to utilize work-life policies than managers of relatively small departments.

In addition to department size, the type of work carried out in the department matters. In the financial sector, managers of departments in which the work is relatively highly skilled will find it easier to cope with the consequences of work-life policies, as much of the work is project-based and lends itself to taking short breaks, doing part-time work or occasionally working at home for a day. Furthermore, highly educated “professionals” often take more responsibility for their own work, taking some of the pressure off the manager. Such professionals are also often judged on “output” instead of the number of hours they work. This implies that managers will be more positive towards employee requests to utilize work-life policies if they manage a “professional” department.

*Hypothesis 1e:* Managers of departments that have a highly educated workforce are more positive towards employee requests to utilize work-life policies than managers of departments that have a low-educated workforce.

### ***Dependency considerations***

In addition to disruptiveness considerations, dependency considerations also play a role. According to Klein et al. (2000), three factors are important in this respect: a) ease of replacement; b) dependency threat; and c) organizational connections.

Ease of replacement refers to the extent to which the subordinate’s knowledge or skill makes him or her difficult to replace. The more difficult it is to replace an employee, and the more the manager “depends” on this employee to maintain or improve the department’s performance, the more power this employee has in negotiations and the more likely it is that the employee’s request will be granted. It is assumed that employees who have few or non-existent critical skills are easier to replace than employees who do have critical skills.

*Hypothesis 2a:* Managers are more positive towards requests to utilize work-life policies when the employee concerned has a great deal of specialist, hard-to-replace knowledge and skill than when the employee has no specialist knowledge and skill.

Note that this hypothesis (based on dependency considerations) is the opposite of hypothesis 1b (derived from disruptiveness considerations), which predicts that managers will be *less* positive towards requests by subordinates with specialist skills that are difficult to replace within their department. This contradiction illustrates the dilemma faced by managers in the daily management of work-life policies.

It is not only ease of replacement that matters in the perceived dependency relationship between manager and employee. Another relevant factor, according to Klein et al. (2000), is the perceived “dependency threat”. This perceived dependency threat refers to the likelihood that the subordinate will leave the organization if his/her request is not fulfilled. Depending on the labour market, such threats can either be strong or weak: in a tight labour market, managers

depend more on their employees because it is more difficult to find suitable replacements. In a relaxed labour market, managers generally depend less on their subordinates.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Managers are more positive towards requests by employees to utilize work-life policies when the labour market is tight than when it is relaxed.

Another relevant factor in the perceived dependency relationship is, according to Klein et al. (2000), 'organizational connections'. Formal and informal connections in the organization are, amongst others, the extent to which the subordinate has connections with powerful figures in the organization who work to safeguard and enhance the subordinate's interests. Additionally, managers may depend more on workers that play a key role in the organization. Since we do not have a measure of organizational connections in this study, we cannot test whether this dependency consideration is valid.

### ***Institutional and organizational context***

Of course, the costs and benefits associated with granting requests to use work-life policies do not depend merely on disruptiveness and dependency considerations. Reality is more complex. Managerial attitudes also depend on the institutional and organizational context in which managers operate. This is especially the case in European countries, where there is a relatively large degree of government involvement compared to the US. For example, in Europe there are statutory provisions that entitle employees to work-life policies (e.g. parental leave and reduction in working hours). Legislation may give rise to a social climate in which employers and managers are expected to show support (den Dulk 2001). In this case, managers might be more positive towards employee requests when compared to managers who operate in a context with few or no statutory provisions entitling employees to work-life arrangements.

The focus here, however, is to test the validity of disruptiveness and dependency arguments in the UK and the Netherlands. The statutory provisions in these two countries are rather similar, namely: paid or partly-paid maternity leave, unpaid parental leave (although the take-up rules are more flexible in the Netherlands), a tradition of part-time employment, and a government that is keen to encourage flexible working practices.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are only minor country differences regarding the statutory provisions, there are relevant cultural differences. According to Hofstede's dimensions of national culture (Hofstede 2001), the UK and the Netherlands differ in the sense that the national culture in the UK can be typed as masculine, while the national culture in the Netherlands can be typed as feminine. Based on this difference in national culture, we argue that national context should be included as a control variable in our analyses.

Next to national context, organizational context is important for managerial attitudes and the cost-benefit analyses regarding the use of work-life policies as well. Even though the present study includes four financial sector organizations that are quite similar (see section *Research design*), there might be some differences in organizational structure and culture that influence managerial attitudes (Den Dulk and De Ruijter 2005). Therefore, we also include controls for organizational context in our models.

### ***Gender***

In this study, we will also include controls for the so called "gender effect". Even though industrialized countries differ in the degree in which the traditional male breadwinner role is dominant, in most countries it is still customary for men to be the primary breadwinners and for women to bear the main responsibility for the family and the household. These "gendered" expectations also influence managerial attitudes and decision-making on work-life policies. Social



norms related to the gender division of labour increase the social costs and benefits accruing to managers when they grant employee requests, since doing so might earn the manager in question the approval or disapproval of his or her peers. The additional social cost of granting requests to male employees will mean a less positive attitude to such requests, while the additional social benefits of granting requests to female employees will result in a more positive attitude.

As research, however, has produced inconclusive results on this issue (Lewis 2003; Klein et al. 2000; Powell and Mainiero 1999), we will include the gender variable as a control in the analyses.

### Research design: a vignette study

The study was a vignette study involving managers from four financial-sector organizations in the Netherlands and the UK: A bank and insurance company and a consultancy firm in the Netherlands and an insurance company and a consultancy firm in the UK. The two consultancy firms belong to the same multinational. All four companies are large firms known for their good working conditions, including work-life policies such as flexible working hours. In each organization, approximately ten managers were asked to participate in the vignette study. The managers selected were those who have the authority to approve or reject an employee request to utilize work-life policies such as part-time work. The managers supervise different types of departments within their organizations. The managers' characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Each manager was asked to consider 12 hypothetical situations in which fictitious employees submit a request to utilize work-life policies. For each fictitious employee, we identified the gender, whether the employee has a supervisory position, whether he/she has a great deal or little knowledge and many or few skills that are difficult to replace, and whether, when the request was submitted, the labour market was tight or relaxed. Shown below is an example vignette in which a fictitious employee submits a request to utilize a work-life policy:

A male employee in your department in a supervisory position asks whether he can work at home occasionally for a day. This employee has a great deal of specialist knowledge and skill that cannot easily be replaced in your department. At the time of his request, there is a tight labour market and it is difficult to find new employees.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample of managers (sex, age, household situation) and of the department they run.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Valid %</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Sex	46					
Male		63				
Female		37				
Household situation	44					
Single, no children living at home		2				
Single, children living at home		5				
Married/cohabiting, no children living at home		34				
Married/cohabiting, children living at home		59				
Type of work in the department	45					
Primary process		62				
Staff/supporting		38				
Age	45		30	60	44	6.67
Number of employees in relevant department	44		7	355	57	73.91

Every manager assessed 12 such situations: three related to a request to work from home occasionally for a day; three related to a request to take short-term leave the next day to care for a sick child; three related to a request to take three months of full-time parental leave; and three related to a request to work part-time (a four-day week). When assessing the vignettes, managers were asked to imagine the request came from an average employee in their own department.

The vignette design offers a number of major advantages in the present study (e.g. Buskens 2002; de Ruijter and Weesie 2007). In “real life”, managers are not frequently confronted with employee requests to utilize these policies (see also Klein et al. 2000). In particular, managers with negative attitudes will hear few such requests because their attitudes also influence the behaviour of their subordinates. For example, if a manager has a very negative attitude towards utilizing work-life policies, his or her subordinates might hesitate to make such a request because they fear being rejected or are afraid it will have a negative impact on their careers. The vignette design makes it possible to investigate managers’ attitudes towards a relatively large number of realistic requests. By limiting the number of vignettes per manager and by asking managers to take an average employee from their own department in mind, we tried to optimize the reliability of the data. Another advantage is that we have more control over the values, variances and covariances of the independent variables, allowing for more efficient design and less ambiguous findings (Buskens 2002).

### Analyses

The formulated hypotheses were tested by estimating hierarchical linear models (see e.g. Bryk and Raudenbush 1992; Snijders and Bosker 1999). We chose this type of model because of the multi-level structure of the data ( $i$  requests, “nested”<sup>2</sup> in  $j$  managers).<sup>3</sup> Since hierarchical linear models are based on two independent populations (and random samples) the number of units at both levels must be sufficiently large. The rule of thumb is that the highest level (in this case that of the manager) must amount to a minimum of 20 units of analyses (see, e.g., Snijders and Bosker 1999). The models were estimated for Dutch and UK managers in private-sector organizations (i.e. 46 managers, assessing 534 unique requests).

The dependent variable in these models is managers’ attitude towards work-life policies (on a scale from 1 to 5). To test the disruptiveness theory, we included the following predictors at the managerial level and at the level of the request:

#### Managerial level

- educational level required for average job in department: primary/secondary education (0), higher education (1);
- department size: small, medium-sized, large (measured using two dummy variables);

#### Level of the request

- type of request: short-term care leave, parental leave, part-time work, work at home occasionally for a day (measured using three dummy variables);
- does the hypothetical employee have a supervisory position? no (0), yes (1);
- does the hypothetical employee have specialist knowledge/skill? no (0), yes (1).

To test the dependency theory, we added the labour market situation at the time of the request (relaxed (0), tight (1)). We added the gender of the hypothetical employee (man (0), woman (1)).

as well as nationality (the Netherlands (0), UK (1)) and organizational context (financial firm (0), consultancy firm (1)) as control variables.

## Findings

Table 2 presents the results of the analyses. Five models were used to explore managerial attitudes towards employee requests to utilize a variety of different work-life policies. Model 1 presents the results when all request types are included; model 2 analyses managers' attitudes towards requests to take up short-term care leave; model 3 concerns requests to work at home occasionally for a day; model 4 concerns requests to take up parental leave; and model 5, finally, concerns hypothetical requests to work part-time. These models give us the opportunity to explore whether different types of arguments (disruptiveness, dependency) play a role when it concerns different types of requests.

Model 1 confirms that the *type* of request is a very important factor in determining managers' attitudes. Managers are generally quite positive about requests to take short-term care leave, the reference category in model 1. With the other factors in the model being constant, the mean score of managers for these types of request is 4.14 on a scale from 1 to 5 (this equals the value of the constant  $\beta_0$ ). Managers' attitudes are most negative when the request involves taking parental leave ( $-1.49$ , compared to requests to take short-term care leave), followed by requests to work part-time ( $-1.10$ ) or to work occasionally from home for a day ( $-1.08$ ).

Given the type of request, what additional factors influence managers' attitudes? As we can see in model 1, the dummy variables "most common position in department requires higher education" and "employee is a woman" have an effect. Managers are generally more positive towards requests to utilize work-life policies if they run a department in which the most common position requires a higher educational level, and they are generally also more positive towards requests made by women.

To examine the relative influence of disruptiveness and dependency arguments further, we also estimated separate models for the different types of request (see models 2 to 5).

### *Short-term care leave*

Model 2 presents the results for the least disruptive type of request: short-term care leave. For this type of request, one notable result is that there is relatively little variation in managers' attitudes, both at the level of the manager and at the level of the request (variance components: 0.31 at the level of the manager, 0.12 at the level of the request). Given the relatively high constant term ( $\beta_0$ : 4.51), this implies that managers are generally quite favourably inclined towards requests to take up short-term care leave.

Nonetheless, there is significant variation in attitudes at both the level of the manager and the request. Attitudes towards requests by women to take up short-term care leave are significantly more positive ( $+0.14$ ) than when comparable requests are made by men.

Another differentiating factor is whether the person requesting short-term care leave has a supervisory position. Managers are significantly less positive ( $-0.15$ ) towards requests made by employees in supervisory positions, thus supporting the disruptiveness argument. Employees who supervise are expected to be present as much as possible.

Another important factor that influences managers' attitudes is the situation on the labour market at the time of the request. Managers are significantly more positive towards requests to take up short-term care leave if they are made when the labour market is tight than when the labour market is relaxed ( $+0.16$ ). This indicates that managers are more likely to bestow "benefits" (in the form of short-term care leave) on employees when it is difficult to recruit new

Table 2. Results of multilevel analyses to explain the reactions of financial sector managers in the UK and the Netherlands to various hypothetical requests by employees to utilize work-life policies (n = 534).

	<i>Model 1 (all requests, n = 534)</i>	<i>Model 2 (short-term care leave, n = 132)</i>	<i>Model 3 (work at home, n = 134)</i>	<i>Model 4 (parental leave, n = 134)</i>	<i>Model 5 (part-time work, n = 134)</i>
Constant $\beta_0$	4.14**	4.51**	2.56**	2.57**	3.44**
Disruptiveness considerations					
Request for short-term care leave	Reference category				
Request to work at home occasionally for a day	– 1.08**				
Request for parental leave	– 1.49**				
Request for part-time work	– 1.10**				
Employee does not work in supervisory position	Reference category				
Employee works in supervisory position	– 0.07	– 0.15*	– 0.20*	0.15	– 0.24*
Small department (< 16 employees)	Reference category				
Medium-sized department (16–61 employees)	0.01	– 0.17	0.45	– 0.25	– 0.05
Large department (> 60 employees)	0.01	– 0.06	– 0.05	0.20	– 0.06
Most common job in department requires primary/secondary education	Reference category				
Most common job in department requires higher education	0.62*	– 0.24	1.08*	0.92*	0.59
Disruptiveness/dependency considerations					
Employee has no specialist knowledge/skill	Reference category				
Employee has specialist knowledge/skill	– 0.06	0.03	0.01	– 0.15	– 0.12
Dependency considerations					
Labour market is relaxed at time of request	Reference category				
Labour market is tight at time of request	0.06	0.16*	0.05	– 0.11	0.08
Control variables					
The Netherlands	Reference category				
UK	0.24	0.38*	0.23	0.39	– 0.07
Bank/insurance company	Reference category				
Consultancy firm	– 0.37	0.00	– 0.05	– 0.82*	– 0.50
Employee is a man	Reference category				
Employee is a woman	0.21**	0.14*	0.03	0.38**	0.12
Variance components					
Level of the manager	0.41**	0.31**	0.87**	0.92**	0.76**
Level of the request	0.72**	0.12**	0.29**	0.33**	0.38**

\*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05 (one-sided test).

employees. There is therefore some evidence for the dependency argument: “cherishing” human capital at times when the department is more dependent on its workers.

### *Working occasionally from home for a day*

What factors influence managers’ attitudes to requests to work at home occasionally for a day? As shown in model 3, managers are significantly more positive towards these requests if they manage a department in which the most common job requires higher education. The effect is substantial: managers in these departments are generally (on a scale of 1 to 5) 1.08 more positive towards requests to work from home than are managers in departments in which the most common position requires primary/secondary education.

Other factors measured at the level of the manager, such as department size, country and organization, do not have any effect on the managers’ attitudes towards these requests. Neither do we find any effect if we look at the variables at the level of the request, except for the variable “employee has a supervisory position”. Managers are significantly less positive ( $-0.20$ ) towards requests made by employees working in a supervisory position. This, again, supports disruptiveness arguments. Employees who supervise are expected to be present at work as much as possible, and are not supposed to work from home, according to the managers.

### *Parental leave*

A request to take three months of full-time parental leave is considered quite disruptive. The results of the analysis of such requests are presented in model 4. First of all, we find that working in the consultancy firm has a significant negative effect. Managers employed in such organizations are generally 0.82 more negative than managers at banks/insurance companies. This type of organization generally has an “up or out” culture, and taking up leave is often viewed as a sign of weak commitment and can be damaging to one’s career.

Model 4 reveals that the educational level of the most common job in the department has a significant positive effect: managers are significantly more positive towards requests to take up full-time parental leave if they run a department in which the most common job requires higher education (the effect of this dummy variable is 0.92 and significant).

Another interesting finding is the gender effect: managers are significantly more positive ( $+0.38$ ) towards requests for parental leave made by women.

### *Part-time work*

The fourth type of request we analysed is the request to work part-time (four instead of five days per week). Model 5 presents the results for these requests. Here, we have only found evidence for the disruptiveness argument. If we look at the effects of variables at the level of the request, we see that the variable “employee has a supervisory position” has a significant negative effect ( $-0.24$ ) on the managers’ attitude. To put it otherwise: managers are relatively less positive towards requests to work part-time if the employee involved supervises others. All other indicators do not seem to affect managers’ attitudes towards part-time work.

An interesting observation is that managers’ attitudes towards the various types of request to utilize work-life policies generally do not differ all that much from one national and organizational context to the next: managers in the UK generally have the same attitude towards utilizing these policies as managers in the Netherlands, and the same can be said for managers in either the consultancy firm or the insurance company/bank. This is not surprising, since the contexts concerned are quite similar with respect to work-life policies (see also *Research*

*design*). The only differences observed are that managers in the UK are generally somewhat more positive towards requests to take up short-term care leave, and that managers at the consultancy firm are generally more negative towards requests to take up parental leave.

### Conclusion and discussion

Managers vary to a large degree in their attitudes towards employee requests to utilize work-life policies, such as working from home or taking parental leave. The role of managers is crucial, since it is they who often decide whether or not to grant employee requests of this nature. This study examined managerial attitudes towards a large number of (hypothetical) requests to utilize these policies in financial sector companies in the UK and the Netherlands, and how these attitudes are influenced by a variety of characteristics, i.e. of a) the employee making the request, b) the request itself and c) the department in which the request is made.

This study is the first to consider both disruptiveness and dependency arguments in order to explain managers' attitudes towards work-life policies, thereby providing an integrated test of the arguments that play a more important role in managers' attitudes towards work-life policy requests: short-term arguments, which have to do with the disruption of work, or long-term arguments, which are more concerned with "cherishing" human capital.

Managers assess how much requests to utilize work-life policies will disrupt the conduct of work in their department. The more disruptive a request is, the less positive their attitude. Additionally, the perceived dependency relationship between manager and employee is assumed to be of influence. This assumption is based on the fact that employees contribute – to varying degrees – to the performance of the department for which the manager is responsible. This implies that the manager depends more on employees who make a relatively large contribution to the department's performance, giving these employees more negotiating power. The expectation is that their negotiating power will tend to make managers more favourably inclined towards their requests.

The findings in this article indicate that short-term arguments matter most: the more disruptive a request is the less positive the attitude of the manager will be. The type of work that is done in the department also matters, further underlining the importance of the disruptiveness arguments. The educational level required for the most common position in the manager's department influences his or her attitude towards requests to work at home occasionally or take up parental leave. Highly educated professionals in the financial sector often have a large measure of autonomy in their work and are often judged on the basis of output rather than presence in the office. Their work is more project-based and it is thus easier to schedule parental leave. The final important factor is whether the employee making the request supervises others; requests made by supervisors are judged less favourably than requests by others. The gender of the employee matters as well: requests by women are judged more favourably than requests by men, in particular when it comes to taking up leave, an indication that care duties are seen mainly as the responsibility of women. Taking short-term leave to care for a sick child or parental leave is specifically linked to child care, whereas requests to work from home or to reduce working hours may be made for reasons other than care (for example to finish work undisturbed at home or for health reasons). Since managers have been found to be more positive towards requests made by women to take up short-term care leave and parental leave, they apparently – still – consider child care to be primarily a woman's responsibility. This helps us understand why men are often hesitant to request leave. If managers have a more negative attitude towards requests by men, male employees may refrain from actually making such requests.

In summary: in this study, evidence has been found for the disruptiveness argument. Managers are mainly interested in the performance of their department or work unit, and work-life



policies are often seen as disruptive, i.e. they make it more difficult to achieve the department's targets.

However, when we consider the least disruptive request, short-term leave, which is also the request managers are the most positive about, we find that besides disruptiveness arguments, dependency arguments also play an important role. When the labour market is tight and it is difficult to find new employees, managers are even more positive about short-term care leave. This indicates that managers consider the degree of disruptiveness as well as the employees' needs and the danger that they might lose valuable staff. However, we did not find the same results regarding working from home occasionally, another relatively non-disruptive request. Managers' lack of enthusiasm for this request might be explained by the fact that working from home gives rise to new coordination and control problems (e.g. Peters and den Dulk 2003) and thus might be considered to be more disruptive than we assumed here.

### **Future research**

Even though this study provides important insights in how managerial attitudes concerning the use of work-life policies are formed, there are several interesting leads for future research.

This study mainly focused on managerial attitudes, not actual decision-making. However, a manager may combine a negative attitude with positive decision-making and vice versa. By additionally analysing the influence of disruptiveness and dependency considerations on managerial decision-making in future research, we might come to more refined conclusions about the relative importance of these types of considerations. For example, it might be the case that the manager's dependency on an employee does not directly affect his or her *attitude* towards the employee's request, but rather the chance of the request actually being *granted*. Even though managers might not look favourably on requests made by employees on whom they depend most because granting such requests will complicate the work in the short-term, they might actually grant the request to avoid the risk of losing the employee altogether. This issue should be examined in future research.

The data analysed were collected in four comparable financial firms in the Netherlands and the UK. Even though we controlled for variation in managers' attitudes between national and organizational contexts, it might be interesting to further explore the influence of national and organizational contexts on managerial attitudes and decision-making in future research by extending the present study to other national contexts as well as other sectors.

In this study, we made a first exploration of the influence of department characteristics on managerial attitudes towards work-life arrangements. We have taken size as well as the education level of the department into account, but other characteristics might be important as well. For example, the degree of specialization of work in a department might be important, since in departments with a high-degree of specialization, it is very difficult to divide the workload among colleagues. The perceived disruptiveness of requests to use work-life arrangements may also depend on the gender composition of the department. These issues should be explored in future research.

Additionally, it would be interesting to examine how a diversity of manager's characteristics (sex, whether he or she has children, etc.) influences managers' attitudes concerning the use of work-life policies. Since the number of managers in this study was limited and because the primary focus of the present study was to analyse the relative importance of dependency and disruption considerations, we restricted the number of managers' characteristics. In future studies, it would be interesting to elaborate on this. For example, are female managers generally more positive towards requests to utilize work-life policies compared to male managers? Do personal experiences with the utilization of these policies increase the likelihood of granting

requests? And: do (social) similarities between the manager and the employee influence the former's attitudes towards requests to utilize work-life policies? Are managers generally more positive towards the requests of employees who resemble them with respect to important social characteristics such as sex and age?

Be it as it may, the present study underlines that managerial attitudes are very important in understanding why many employees are not taking advantage of the wide range of work-life policies on offer nowadays. Managerial attitudes are not only important in understanding managerial decision-making with respect to requests to utilize work-life policies, but are also crucial in understanding the requesting behaviour of employees. The evidence found in this study suggests that managers generally take a short-term perspective on work-life policies, rather than a long-term perspective in which human capital is cherished. They do not, as yet, consider that employees' work-life balance contributes to organizational goals. If, however, organizations want to retain valuable human capital, future policies should offer additional incentives or rewards to managers for implementing work-life policies, for example by introducing facilities to manage the disruption in work.

## Notes

1. In the UK, employees are entitled to 26 to 52 weeks (depending on tenure) maternity leave, 2 weeks paternity leave and 13 weeks parental leave. In the Netherlands employees are entitled to 16 weeks maternity leave, 2 days paternity leave and 13 weeks parental leave (e.g. den Dulk and van Doorne-Huiskes 2007).
2. A "nested" data structure means that one unit at the lower level (*i*) falls under one unit at the higher level (*j*). For the present study, this means that each request is assessed by only one manager (no two managers ever assessed precisely the same request), given that each manager was asked to bear in mind the characteristics of his/her own department as well as its most common position when considering the requests. Since each manager works in a different department, all requests are consequently "unique".
3. In a "regular" regression model, the fact that two (independent) populations – one of managers and one of requests – were involved would be ignored (Woodhouse, Rasbash, Goldstein and Yang 1995). Regression models ignore that the data consist of several levels and that *n* is overestimated. This makes the conclusion more likely that manager characteristics have significant effects on the assessments of different requests, whereas in reality there are no such effects (Type I error).

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